

# SOCIAL NORMS, VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG) AND CHANGE IN SOMALIA

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# Social Norms, VAWG and Change in Somalia

Literature Review

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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

<b>CEFM</b>	Child, Early and Forced Marriage
<b>FGM/C</b>	Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Person
<b>IPV</b>	Intimate Partner Violence
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NPV</b>	Non-Partner Violence
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence Against Women & Girls

## Executive Summary

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a pervasive issue in Somalia, with devastating and diverse consequences. Prevalence estimates suggest that 99% of women and girls in Somalia aged 15-49 have received Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), 45% of girls are married as children, and 35.6% of women experience physical or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) in their adult lifetime. **Social norms in Somalia serve to perpetuate VAWG and present barriers to support and justice, but can also protect women from violence and its consequences.** This literature review seeks to identify and explore social norms that relate to VAWG in Somalia, as a component of a larger social norms mapping study.

The categories of VAWG that were most frequently discussed in the literature were sexual violence, IPV, child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and FGM/C. Social norms that were referenced in the literature as possible contributors to sexual violence included the acceptance of rape as 'normal,' rape as a display of manhood, and rape as a form of humiliation/vengeance. **However, the evidence points towards a prevailing social norm in Somalia that men should *not* commit sexual violence.** The evidence suggests that normative barriers to support/justice exist, such as the norm that sexual violence should not be discussed (cultural taboo), the expectation that women should not report rape to protect the family's reputation, and the norm that sexual violence should be resolved by customary law (*xeer*).

Whilst most Somalis view IPV as unacceptable, many believe that IPV is justified as a form of discipline, with some interpretations of sharia law favouring this norm. As with sexual violence, survivors of IPV are typically expected to remain silent and endure abusive relationships, rather than bring shame to the family by reporting. **Men are less likely to abuse their wives if their mother-in-law is living with them and the cultural expectation that brothers should look after their sisters serves to protect women from IPV.**

The literature points towards a range of social norms that may contribute to CEFM in Somalia, with CEFM used as a means of safeguarding girls/women from rape and its consequences, improving a family's financial position, and circumventing the shame associated with pre-marital sex. Whilst a large proportion of girls get married early, many Somalis believe that girls should not marry until they are adults.

FGM/C is ubiquitous in Somalia with cultural, religious and marital reasons particularly central to the decision to subject girls to FGM/C. Male preference towards women who have received FGM/C and social pressure to receive FGM/C were also found to be major contributing factors to the continuation of this practice. **However, there are signs of shifting social norms related to FGM/C amongst Somalis** with some men stating a preference for uncircumcised women and an increasing trend towards a less extreme form of FGM/C has been recently documented.

**Other forms of VAWG that remain problematic in Somalia include forcing women/girls to remain housebound, and abandonment of women by their husbands.** Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between social norms and VAWG in Somalia, to help inform the design of interventions that can effectively prevent VAWG and protect women and girls from its devastating consequences.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a global pandemic<sup>1</sup> and a serious and pervasive issue in Somalia. Approximately 99% of women and girls aged 15-49 in Somalia have received Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C)<sup>2</sup> and the prevalence of child marriage is estimated at 45%.<sup>3</sup> A prevalence study undertaken in Somalia in 2018 found that 35.6% of women experience physical or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) in their adult lifetime and 16.5% of women experience physical or sexual non-partner violence (NPV) in their adult lifetime.<sup>4</sup> These figures are troubling and are likely to be an underestimation in part due to the fact that social norms in Somalia generally discourage reporting of VAWG. Understanding the relationship between social norms and VAWG is important when designing interventions that seek to prevent VAWG and protect survivors from its tragic consequences. This literature review forms an integral component of a qualitative study on social norms and VAWG in Somalia. The purpose of the literature review is to contribute to an increased understanding of the influence of social norms on VAWG in Somalia, inform the questions for data collection, and provide a source of information for triangulation of findings collected by other methods.

### Definition of Violence Against Women and Girls

There are various definitions for VAWG in the global literature. The United Nations (UN) definition of VAWG will be used in this study as it encompasses a wide range of types of VAWG and is widely accepted (including by the Department for International Development, UK). The UN defines VAWG as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”<sup>5</sup>

### What are social norms?

Social norms can be understood as “the shared beliefs within a social unit about the appropriate ways to think, feel, and behave in a given context.”<sup>6</sup> Social norms differ from individual beliefs and attitudes and can be subdivided into “beliefs about how others expect one to behave” (injunctive norms) and “beliefs about how others behave” (descriptive norms).<sup>7</sup> An overview of reviews on the ways in which the term *social norms* is used in the literature revealed a certain degree of disagreement as to how social norms are defined. However, the study did reveal consensus between reviewers that social norms have a social component, they are action-oriented, and they can affect a person’s health and wellbeing.<sup>8</sup> ‘Social norms’ is an umbrella term encompassing norms related to tradition (customary norms), religion (religious norms), culture (cultural norms), amongst others. Social norms can have a positive impact on health and wellbeing, for example the norm that female members of the family should be respected.<sup>9</sup> Yet, social norms can also negatively influence health and wellbeing, such as the norm that survivors of sexual violence should remain silent instead of seeking support to protect family honour.<sup>9</sup> It is important to consider both the positive and negative social norms when undertaking research on the impact of social norms on health and wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

Social norms constitute one of several factors that can influence the likelihood of VAWG occurring and the subsequent response to violence. Social norms are best understood in relation to these other contributory and protective factors given that overlap between these influences exists. Heise’s (1998) landmark socio-ecological model categorises factors contributing to VAWG as relating to personal history (e.g. perpetrator’s experience of violence/witnessing violence in childhood), microsystem (e.g. male dominance in the family or use of alcohol), exosystem (e.g. low socioeconomic status, isolation of woman and family), and macrosystem influences (e.g. social norms).<sup>11</sup> Social norms may directly contribute to VAWG, e.g. the societal expectation that girls should receive FGM/C, or indirectly contribute to VAWG, e.g. promoting a culture of gender inequality in which VAWG is accepted, or in some instances, encouraged. Whilst it is important to recognise the influence of these more indirect norms, this study will primarily focus on social norms that are more clearly and directly related to VAWG. Examples of questions that this literature review will seek to address include:

- What forms of VAWG do Somali women experience?
- How are the various forms of VAWG defined and understood by Somalis?
- Which social norms contribute to VAWG?
- How do social norms influence the response to VAWG?
- Do any social norms offer protection from VAWG and its consequences?

## 1.2. Literature review protocol

The literature review drew from a variety of sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, technical reports, policy statements, theses/dissertations, amongst others. Literature searches of four major online databases (Embase, Cinahl Plus, Scopus, and PsychINFO) were undertaken. A date restriction was not applied to the search results, to maximise the number of results generated. To ensure that relevant studies were not inadvertently excluded due to use of different language, variations of each search term were used. For example, variations of VAWG included “domestic violence”, “intimate partner violence”, and “sexual violence”, amongst others. Variations of the term “social norms” included “norm”, “behaviour”, and “culture”. Boolean operators “AND” and “OR” were used to cover all possible combinations of terms and truncation to ensure that minor variations in terms did not result in the exclusion of relevant results e.g. plural vs singular words. Searches were conducted within the title, abstract, and keyword lists of each database.

Articles were initially assessed on the basis of their title and abstract in order to screen their relevance for this review. Following this, full-text copies of studies for possible inclusion in the review were obtained in order to conduct a more thorough evaluation of their relevance. In determining relevant studies for this review, the following inclusion criteria were used:

- i. The study is on the topic of VAWG (UN definition).<sup>5</sup> This includes all forms of VAWG experienced at any age, perpetrated by any individual or individuals.
- ii. A connection between social norms and VAWG is established/proposed in the study
- iii. The research is undertaken in Somalia or in neighbouring Somali diaspora populations
- iv. The full text of the research article is accessible and available in English

# 2. Sexual Violence

## 2.1. How is sexual violence perceived/understood by Somalis?

Traditional Somali society uses two definitions for sexual violence interchangeably.<sup>12,13</sup> The first definition “*kufsi*” describes forced sexual intercourse with a woman and is derived from the word “*kuf*” meaning “to fall down.”<sup>13</sup> Musse’s (2014) interpretation is that this term implies “both the use of force to make one fall down and a drop in honour and prestige for those who are forced to fall.”<sup>13</sup> This suggests that the drop in honour and prestige is borne by the survivors. The closest western equivalent of the term *kufsi* is the word “rape.”<sup>13</sup> The second definition, “*faro-xumeyn*,” is broader and means “bad-fingered,” describing acts of physical and psychological violence against women, including sexual violence.<sup>12,13</sup> *Faro-xumeyn* is sometimes used as a euphemism for rape.<sup>13</sup> It could be argued that these definitions do not fully capture the severity of sexual violence, potentially impacting on how sexual violence is perceived within society.

The general consensus in Somalia is that rape is a form of abuse however, there is variation in the extent to which Somalis agree with this claim.<sup>12</sup> Some Somali men do not perceive “attempted” rape, sexual violence committed by relatives or friends, rape motivated by the prospect of marriage, or rape within marriage as forms of abuse.<sup>12,14</sup> At the utmost extreme, some men in Somalia do not consider any sex acts (including rape) as abuse.<sup>15</sup> The penal code could also impact on the perception of sexual

violence in Somali society. It has been argued that classifying rape under the headings “Offense Against Modesty and Sexual Honour” and “Crimes Against Morals and Decency” suggests that rape is not perceived as an offence against autonomy and bodily integrity.<sup>16</sup> The requirement of “violence or threats” as a necessary condition for rape also suggests that other instruments used in rape such as coercion are not widely recognised.<sup>16</sup> Sexual harassment is rarely considered a serious human rights violation in Somalia and tends to be reduced to a male behavioural problem.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.2. Social norms contributing to sexual violence

### Rape accepted as ‘normal’

The normalisation of rape in Somalia has become a well-documented phenomenon and is a particular issue in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>14,16,18</sup> As explained by one survivor in an IDP camp in Mogadishu “rape is a frequent occurrence in Somalia. Here, rape is normal” (descriptive norm).<sup>16</sup> The civil war is thought to have been a major contributor to the normalisation of rape. Prior to the civil war, rape was considered an unacceptable violation of clan honour and contrary to customary norms that existed to protect women and children.<sup>14</sup> The civil war resulted in the systematic violation of customary law (*xeer*) leading to a weakening of traditional protective norms.<sup>14</sup> This added to a perception of immunity by perpetrators as a consequence of a compromised justice system, limited or no communication at the community level to prevent the escalation of violence as well as other, longstanding barriers to conviction (discussed later).<sup>12,14,16</sup> However, one report claimed that “the easing of hostilities and expansion of pockets of security seem to have been accompanied by an increase, as opposed to an abating, of sexual violence,” which they attribute to longstanding gender discrimination, impunity coupled with desensitisation to violence, and cultural norms that prevented the inclusion of sexual violence in peacebuilding and reconciliation discussions.<sup>14</sup> The report did not specify the particular cultural norms it was referring to, however, cultural taboo could prevent the inclusion of sexual violence in peacebuilding and reconciliation discussions. The normalisation of rape in Somalia cannot simply be conflated with familiarisation with rape as a result of a high *frequency* of rape incidents but represents a change in perception of the *severity* of rape among other extreme forms of violence occurring in Somalia. As explained by El-Bushra & Sahl (2005) “it is commonly said nowadays that where people are taking each other’s lives, rape is insignificant, a petty offence which can be solved by small fines.”<sup>19</sup> An increasing trend in gang rape has also been documented in Somalia, largely attributed to the fact that under customary law rape is considered a single offence, thus the financial compensation is divided between perpetrators.<sup>12,14,20,21</sup>

### Rape as exercising the ‘right to rape’

Several of the studies included in the literature review reported the descriptive norm that men rape women due to the belief that they have a ‘right’ to have sex with women without their consent.<sup>12,17,18</sup> Youth participants from one study articulated that men rape young women to “show them that they are men with manhood (*raganimo*) traits,” with acts of date rape considered in accordance with the “right to exercise *raganimo*.”<sup>12</sup> It has been argued that this behaviour may represent a deviation from the traditional concept of *raganimo*, which is not predicated on violence against women but rather mastering skills and developing personal qualities.<sup>22</sup> One of the studies indicates that male entitlement similarly sanctions marital rape, reporting that “the social norm within marriage is that a husband has the right to sex unless the wife is sick or unwell.”<sup>12</sup>

### Rape to facilitate marriage

Rape may also be used as a tool to achieve marriage by lowering the price of the unaffordable dowry as the woman is perceived as less valuable.<sup>12,14</sup> In addition, due to the social norm that it is shameful for women to have sex before marriage, families may arrange for their daughter to be married rather than risk their daughter being perceived as too undesirable for marriage due to the rape.<sup>12,14</sup> As explained by one individual in an IDP camp in Somaliland “even if this marriage ends in divorce, this is preferable to public knowledge about the rape.”<sup>23</sup>

### Rape as humiliation/revenge



Prior to the civil war, rape of a clan member by another clan was considered a serious event, and one that could lead to inter-clan conflict.<sup>19</sup> This dynamic changed during the civil war and sexual violence became used as a means of humiliating the other clan, or as an act of revenge.<sup>19,24–26</sup>

## 2.3. Barriers to support/justice

### Discussing sexual violence is culturally taboo

One key barrier to reporting arising from the literature is the injunctive social norm that sexual violence (and sexual matters in general) should be kept private and must not be discussed openly i.e. these matters are culturally taboo.<sup>12,15,16,27,28</sup> Women are expected to only report sexual violence if they have serious physical injuries as a result, suggesting an alignment between this social norm and state law, which limits the options for charging a perpetrator where physical evidence is limited or non-existent.<sup>18</sup> The norm that sexual violence should remain private is even more pronounced in relation to sexual violence within marriage, with marital rape so underreported that it is interpreted by some to be practically “non-existent.”<sup>12</sup>

### Sexual violence not reported due to fear of reprisals

The evidence suggests that women keep silent about sexual violence out of fear of reprisals. In addition to rejection from family/friends and abandonment by their husband,<sup>18</sup> reprisals for reporting rape that have been identified in the literature include physical assault,<sup>12</sup> threats,<sup>12</sup> further sexual violence,<sup>16</sup> eviction from IDP camps by host communities<sup>12</sup> and dissemination of video evidence of rape.<sup>12,14</sup> The latter is a relatively new phenomenon amongst the youth and men, with the threat of disseminating footage of sexual violence employed as a tactic to humiliate the survivor and ensure their silence.<sup>12,14</sup> Survivors tend to keep silent for fear that their parents would blame them if the video evidence were to surface.<sup>12</sup> Filing a report against military personnel or the police puts the survivors at risk of being arrested, and in the most extreme cases, the military court in Somalia has sentenced rape defendants to death.<sup>16</sup> Reporting rape perpetrated by a member of Al-Shabaab to authorities can result in the group murdering the survivor by means designed to inflict maximum suffering e.g. stoning.<sup>29</sup>

Survivors and families are not the only ones who fear reprisals; IDP communities may fear eviction by their host community, explaining why “silence has become the foremost coping mechanism [for them].”<sup>12</sup> However, interviews with members of host communities have also revealed sympathy for survivors from IDP communities and willingness to participate in prevention campaigns for sexual violence, suggesting a mixed picture.<sup>12</sup> Local authorities may not report to federal authorities to protect their own security/job prospects, for example, out of fear that they may lose their job by pursuing a well-connected perpetrator.<sup>12</sup> As a result, higher authorities in Somalia remain unaware of the extent of the problem and tend to downplay the severity of the issue, regardless of the potential for negative repercussions from the international community.<sup>12</sup>

### Sexual violence not reported due to fear of shame/stigma

It is widely recognised that reporting sexual violence in Somalia brings shame to the survivor and their family to a far greater extent than to the perpetrator, thus women and families commonly choose not to report sexual violence to avoid this shame/stigma.<sup>16,18,23,30,31,21</sup> A woman’s purity is highly valued in Somalia. Participants in a study on non-partner sexual violence in Somaliland explained that a Somali woman is considered to be like a clean mirror, with an act like rape affecting the mirror’s transparency.<sup>30</sup> By reporting sexual violence to the authorities, a woman risks her reputation in the community and becomes vulnerable to stigma (e.g. the survivor may be accused of having contracted HIV/AIDS).<sup>18,30</sup>

Reporting sexual violence may result in rejection of the survivor by her own family.<sup>18</sup> The survivor may be blamed for the sexual assault, even by her own family/friends, adding to the survivor’s self-blame.<sup>18,30</sup> This shame and stigma can be severe and long-term. As explained by women in a Somali community, “she will always be pointed out by the community, just like our flag.”<sup>30</sup> Participants in the same study explained that if they were survivors of rape “their lives would be over because of hopelessness and the huge stress that would have ended the value of their lives” adding that “one strategy to overcome this was suicide.”<sup>30</sup> Given the gravity of the implications of reporting for survivors, some women have

explained that they “use the normalisation of rape in their favour, to hide such incidents from their husbands and other male relatives.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Sexual violence should not be reported to protect survivor/family dignity**

Given the shame and stigma associated with sexual violence, the prevailing social norm is that sexual violence is handled within the family and not reported to authorities.<sup>18</sup> Reputation within the community is considered important in Somalia and protecting the dignity of the survivor and their family is commonly considered of greater importance than the safety and welfare of the survivor.<sup>18,30,31</sup> If the survivor becomes pregnant as a result of the rape, the family is likely to either request an abortion or ask the survivor to cover it up.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, the woman may be compelled to abandon the infant as a final solution.<sup>30</sup> Migration to another country is also viewed as a solution to avoiding the burden of shame.<sup>30</sup>

### **Male relatives should report VAWG, not survivors**

A further barrier to support and justice for survivors reported by one study is the social norm that male relatives should report crimes committed against women, rather than the survivors themselves.<sup>23</sup> As explained by a judge in Borama (Somalia), if a women were to attend a police station unaccompanied “the first thing the officer will ask is why she did not come with her father.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Customary norms**

If clan elders are informed about sexual violence, they tend to encourage the survivor and family to keep the matter in the customary system in order to protect the survivor’s reputation and marriage prospects.<sup>23</sup> Historically, cases of sexual violence used to be resolved by a minimum of a public beating at the hands of both men and women.<sup>15,24</sup> This punishment was not restricted to rape and was also used for other forms of sexual violence, e.g. groping.<sup>24</sup> In addition to physical punishment, any fines imposed would have to be paid by the perpetrator himself, as it was forbidden for a perpetrator to request another individual to pay a fine on their behalf.<sup>24</sup> Currently, a common response to rape is for elders to request that the perpetrator marries the survivor or compensates the survivor’s family.<sup>16,21</sup> Resolution by elders may occur without the consent of the survivor, causing further upset.<sup>30</sup> Marriage of the survivor to the perpetrator serves the purpose of circumventing the ‘shame of marriagelessness’ and ensuring the economic and social protection of the survivor.<sup>24,32</sup>

There are two forms of compensation according to tradition: *xaal marin*, or compensation for violation, typically consists of either a verbal apology or financial remuneration.<sup>12</sup> And *maslaxo*, or addressing the interest of the survivor, requires the payment of medical expenses to restore the survivor to prior health.<sup>12</sup> If there is financial compensation, the survivor may not receive any of the money herself.<sup>12,16</sup> The elders frequently benefit financially for helping settle the cases, taking a proportion of the compensation owed to the survivor’s family.<sup>23</sup> The amount of compensation varies depending on the age of the survivor and their marital/family status e.g. 50 camels for married women with children and 10 camels for widows.<sup>33</sup> When rape occurs across clan lines, the compensation under *xeer* is also impacted by the relative size of the clans and the relationship between them.<sup>32</sup> Compensation is generally distributed amongst the *dia*-paying group and rarely distributed to the family of the survivor, contrary to a declaration (agreement between elders).<sup>32</sup>

## **2.4. Legal system preferences**

Despite numerous problems with the response of customary law to rape, some women indicated a preference for the customary system as elders tended to respect their confidentiality to a far greater extent than would be achieved pursuing justice through state law.<sup>33</sup> With the exception of IDPs and minorities, most cases of rape in Somalia are handled under *xeer*.<sup>21,32</sup> In the case of IDPs, some women do not even have the option of customary law as traditional *xeer* resolution is not permitted when the perpetrator is from a majority clan and the survivor is from a minority clan; some neighbouring clans do not agree to enter into *xeer* with IDPs.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, IDPs often have no option but to follow the state judicial process. IDPs tend to show a preference for the state justice system (thought to be largely due to necessity), however, survivors from this group still feel discriminated against and often feel that their case has not been taken seriously.<sup>32</sup>

*Sharia* law punishes perpetrators of rape harshly compared to customary law or the penal code. A common interpretation of *Sharia* law is that if the perpetrator of rape is unmarried his sentence will be 100 lashes, but if married, the perpetrator will be sentenced to death.<sup>33</sup> Customary law is more commonly used than *Sharia* in cases of sexual violence, with one theory that this is due to the perception that the severity of *Sharia* law's retributive justice can harm relationships between families and clans.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.5. Protective social norms

In contrast to the social norms contributing to sexual violence (see above), one study reported a protective social norm that men should not commit sexual violence as it is a form of abuse.<sup>12</sup> And as mentioned above, customary law provides two forms of compensation for survivors (*xaal marin* and *maslaxo*), however, these often offer little benefit for survivors of sexual violence.<sup>12,16</sup>

# 3. Intimate Partner Violence

## 3.1. How is IPV perceived/understood by Somalis?

Whilst IPV is viewed as unacceptable by most Somalis, some believe that it is acceptable in certain situations,<sup>18,24</sup> with one extreme view being that IPV is an expression of a man's love for his wife.<sup>18</sup> This latter view is not merely held by men, with some women believing that their husband does not love them if he does not beat them.<sup>34,35</sup>

Various factors have been found to impact on the acceptability of IPV. One survey of 2600 Somali citizens (CHANGES project) conducted in February – March 2016 found that men are more likely to have a 'progressive attitude' towards IPV (zero tolerance) if they are from a majority clan, have a daughter, and live in communities where women are engaged in community decision-making.<sup>36</sup> A progressive attitude in women was found to be positively correlated with majority clan status and completion of secondary education (interestingly higher education was shown to negatively correlate with progressive attitudes amongst men). The study found huge variation in the percentage of women with a progressive attitude towards IPV between districts/locations in Somalia ranging from 8% in Badhan to 88% in Galdogob. Encouragingly, the study revealed an improvement in progressive attitudes compared to a study undertaken in 2006.

## 3.2. Social norms contributing to IPV

### IPV acceptable as a form of discipline

In the CHANGES project (mentioned above), participants were given several scenarios and asked whether IPV was justified as a form of discipline in each scenario.<sup>36</sup> In every scenario, the majority of respondents felt that IPV was not justified, however, in each scenario there were some participants that believed that IPV was justified. An interesting finding is that in every scenario, women were more likely than men to agree with the statement that IPV was justified, with greater congruity between women's responses compared to men's.

A common interpretation of tradition and Islamic doctrines is that men have a right to beat their wives as a method of discipline.<sup>12,18,31</sup> Proponents of this view may refer to a verse in the Quran (4:34) which is often interpreted as permitting a man to beat his wife 'gently' or 'a little' if other efforts to bring her into line are unsuccessful.<sup>37</sup> However, not all scholars agree that this verse of the Quran sanctions IPV.<sup>14,37</sup> Violence against men by women, however, is indiscriminately viewed as improper in Somali society and immediately dealt with either through divorce or legal redress, resulting in negative financial and emotional implications for women.<sup>12</sup> There is no formal law prohibiting domestic violence in Somalia, nor is there a reference to IPV in the penal code.<sup>34,38,39</sup>

### 3.3. Barriers to support/justice

#### Survivor silence

As with sexual violence, the pressure to present a good image in addition to fear of reprisals (i.e. further violence), commonly leads survivors to choose to remain silent rather than report IPV.<sup>15,24</sup>

#### IPV typically resolved within the customary legal system

Resolution of IPV tends to occur within the customary legal system, even in the most severe cases that result in disabling physical injuries or miscarriage.<sup>12</sup> The response to IPV in the customary legal system tends to involve financial compensation (*xaal marin*) or mediation by male elders of the group, neither of which sensitively and effectively address the needs of survivors.<sup>26</sup>

#### IPV is tolerated until serious injury/death

Regardless of whether or not individuals believe that IPV is acceptable in some situations, it is generally tolerated until it results in serious injury/death or becomes socially disruptive.<sup>16,33,40</sup>

### 3.4. Protective social norms

#### Perpetration of IPV is unacceptable

Despite tolerance of its occurrence, as mentioned above, IPV is generally viewed as unacceptable in Somalia and a practice to be discouraged.<sup>36</sup>

#### Men less likely to abuse wife if cohabiting with mother-in-law

In Somalia, it is customary for children to care for their parents when they become elderly. Traditionally the mother goes to live with her daughters whereas the father lives with his sons.<sup>15</sup> A husband is considered less likely to commit IPV if his mother-in-law is living in the same household.<sup>15,41</sup>

#### Men should protect their sisters from IPV

A further norm that may offer protection for women is the cultural expectation that brothers should look after their sisters for the duration of their lives, including confronting their sisters' husbands in the event of IPV (if they are made aware of the abuse) to ensure the safety of their sister and her children.<sup>24</sup> As articulated by Badawi (2000), "a brother will often risk his life, sacrifice obligations to his wife and children when his sister is suffering."<sup>24</sup> However, there is concern that civil war and forced migration has impacted the implementation of this protective norm.<sup>24</sup>

## 4. Child, Early and Forced Marriage

### 4.1. How is CEFM perceived/understood by Somalis?

Many Somali communities do not consider Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) a form of VAWG.<sup>12</sup> Indeed many believe that there are numerous benefits of CEFM for girls and women, including producing children early, efficiency in finding a husband, improving the status of the individual in the community and reducing the likelihood of extramarital sexual relationships (including rape) and unwanted pregnancy.<sup>12,36</sup> Despite acknowledging the disadvantages of CEFM, such as health problems, domestic violence and limiting education, many Somalis still believe that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, with men more likely than women to hold this belief.<sup>14,36</sup>

### 4.2. Social norms contributing to CEFM

#### Acceptance of CEFM

CEFM has been a cultural norm in Somalia for decades.<sup>15,29,42</sup> UNICEF estimates that 8% of girls in Somalia are married by age 15 and that 45.3% of girls in Somalia are married by the age of 18.<sup>43</sup> An interpretation of Islamic law is that it endorses CEFM as it permits boys and girls to marry at the age of maturity (*baaluq*), commonly understood (particularly by men) as being the age of menstruation for girls.<sup>12</sup> Marriage before the age of 18 was made illegal in the 1975 Somali Family Code, yet marriage at 16 is still permitted with parental consent.<sup>44</sup> The 2012 Somali constitution requires the consent of both the man and woman and forbids marriage before the age of maturity – but does not define maturity.<sup>44,45</sup>

### Customary norms

Somali customary law outlines several traditional practices that render CEFM acceptable, such as the exchange of women to facilitate a peace deal with another clan (*godobtir*),<sup>32,33</sup> widow inheritance (*dumaal* or *higsiiisan*),<sup>14,32,33,46</sup> rape as a means of reducing the bride price<sup>14</sup> and ‘*dhabar-garac*,’ when a woman is abducted and abused until she marries the abductor.<sup>10,13</sup> Forced *dumaal*, where a woman is forced to marry a male relative of her deceased husband, is no longer widely practiced, so *dumaal* typically occurs voluntarily as the relationship between the widow’s children and the deceased husband’s family is considered of utmost importance.<sup>33</sup> *Higsiiisan*, the forced marriage of the sister of a deceased wife to her husband, is rarely practiced today.<sup>41</sup> Family members may choose the husband based on their feelings towards the individual, rather than their female relative’s feelings.<sup>15</sup>

### CEFM as protection from rape and its consequences

The belief that marriage can protect a woman from rape, or protect her dignity after rape (as discussed earlier), is considered to be a contributor to CEFM,<sup>12</sup> possibly related to the norm that married women are typically not targets of rape. However, whilst some believe that marrying the perpetrator is in the best interest of survivors, some Somalis believe that it is unfair on the survivor and constitutes a further form of punishment.<sup>30</sup> Some also argue that it can destroy families if the couple are not in agreement from the beginning.<sup>30</sup> The use of CEFM as a means of protection from rape and other forms of sexual violence is more common in IDP communities and minority clans, who believe that active discrimination has made them vulnerable to sexual violence.<sup>12,14</sup>

### CEFM as a remedy for loss of virginity

CEFM may also provide a means of securing marriage following loss of a woman’s virginity, given that loss of virginity generally leads to a subsequent reduction in perceived desirability by men.<sup>12</sup>

### CEFM as a ‘marriage of convenience’

The evidence suggests that poverty may contribute to CEFM, with the Somali Growth, Enterprise, Employment, and Livelihoods Gender Analysis Report (2016) citing evidence of families marrying off their daughters to generate much-needed revenue from the bride price.<sup>40</sup> This is often referred to as a ‘marriage of convenience.’<sup>12,24,42</sup> These economic reasons, in addition to protection concerns, may partly explain why CEFM increased steadily with the escalation of the civil war, and may be part of the reason why CEFM is generally understood to be on the rise in IDP communities despite being in decline in Somalia overall.<sup>12,14</sup> There are concerns that customary due diligence around the capacity of the husband to pay the dowry has become less common, thus in some cases families may not receive the expected reward.<sup>14</sup>

### Adolescent-led marriage

One study found that most adolescents in Somaliland/Puntland get married before the age of 18 and that one of the reasons for this was that adolescents would choose to get married to elevate their social status amongst peers.<sup>44</sup> Parents who did not agree with their child’s decision to get married sometimes provided ‘façade consent’ for the marriage to avoid the shame of elopement. A further finding was that adolescents would get married due to the desire to have sex, as a result of the injunctive norm forbidding premarital sex.<sup>44</sup>

### 4.3. Barriers to prevention

#### Requesting exemption from CEFM is '*caasanimo*'

An injunctive norm reported by one study is that women should not request exemption from CEFM as doing so is '*caasinimo*' (disobedience) and may lead to punishment.<sup>12</sup> This may include physical violence, verbal/emotional abuse, eviction from the home or a curse being placed on the individual.<sup>12</sup>

### 4.4. Protective social norms

#### Girls should not marry until they are older than 18

One study revealed that most participants (men and women) living in Somaliland/Puntland were against child marriage, arguing that whilst it is good for the man to be older than his wife, girls should be at least 18, with one possible explanation for this norm being the belief that women need to be mature enough to bear and raise children.<sup>44</sup>

## 5. Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting

### 5.1. How is FGM/C perceived and understood by Somalis?

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) is a well-established norm affecting an estimated 99% of women in Somalia.<sup>2</sup> A classification system published jointly by three United Nations agencies (WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF) in 1997 subdivided FGM/C into four forms.<sup>49</sup> FGM/C types I and II involve varying degrees of excision of the external female genitalia, type III also includes closure of the vaginal opening (infibulation), and type IV (unclassified) encompasses a variety of different injuries to the female genital organs.<sup>49</sup> There are a number of reasons why FGM/C is practiced by Somalis. Culture, religion, chastity, aesthetics, hygiene, national identity, social acceptance, improved marriage prospects, decreased sexual pleasure for the woman, discouragement of female promiscuity, tradition and honour have been cited as motivating the decision to proceed with FGM/C.<sup>15,36,42,48,50-52</sup> Many Somalis consider FGM/C as either condoned or required by Islamic law.<sup>12,48,53</sup> However, others believe that it is a violation of Islamic law.<sup>33,37</sup> There is a divergence in views as to how FGM/C is understood in Somalia. One study found that FGM/C in Somalia is typically understood as constituting infibulation (type III) and 'sunnah' forms,<sup>54</sup> with another study finding that whilst the latter term is used in most countries to refer to the less extreme forms of FGM/C (types I or II) in Somalia it can refer to more than one combination of types I, II, and III.<sup>55</sup> A further study reported that some Somalis believe that the term 'FGM/C' refers only to infibulation (type III).<sup>53</sup> There is a lack of consensus in Somalia as to whether or not FGM/C amounts to VAWG, with some labelling it 'torture' and others even equating it with a reduction in gender-based violence.<sup>14,37</sup> Many Somalis believe that infibulation is the only form that has health consequences.<sup>36,53</sup>

### 5.2. Social norms contributing to FGM/C

#### Cultural/religious norms

In the majority of type III (infibulation) FGM/C cases, culture is given as the reason for FGM/C, whereas religion is reported as the main motivation for *sunnah* circumcisions.<sup>36</sup> Regardless of whether or not FGM/C is endorsed by Islamic law, the interpretation of religion has been a major contributor to the continuation of this practice.<sup>42</sup>

#### Male preference for women who have received FGM/C

Women typically make the decision to proceed with FGM/C,<sup>48,53</sup> and according to one study conducted in Somaliland, only 8% of households include men and boys in the decision-making process.<sup>56</sup> It is possible that this is in part due to the fact that in Somali society, mothers are responsible for their daughters and fathers are responsible for their sons.<sup>48</sup> In some cases, fathers have been known to try

to stop FGM/C from occurring, only to be overruled by the mother, grandmother and/or other female relatives.<sup>57</sup> Yet it has been argued that men perpetuate the problem in an indirect way, by expressing a marriage preference for women who have undergone FGM/C. One survey seeking the perspective of Somali men on FGM/C found that only 4% of men would prefer to marry a woman who has not received FGM/C.<sup>58</sup> However, amongst some diaspora populations, Somali men have been found to have a general preference for uncircumcised women.<sup>48,59</sup>

### **Social exclusion of uncircumcised women**

A further social norm that may contribute to FGM/C in some Somali populations is the injunctive norm that uncircumcised women should be socially rejected. In a study undertaken in Ethiopia with a (predominantly) Somali population, 31.3% of respondents believed that uncircumcised women should be socially rejected.<sup>52</sup>

### **Wedding ritual**

A tradition contributing to the continuation of type III FGM/C is the ritual that on a woman's wedding night her closed vaginal opening is meant to be ceremoniously opened by her husband through sexual penetration.<sup>51</sup> This tradition gives the husband the "prestige of opening his wife" with many circumcised women seeing it as evidence of virtue.<sup>51</sup>

### **Re-infibulation after childbirth**

A cultural norm is for women to choose re-infibulation after childbirth.<sup>51</sup> This serves to make the women a "virgin" or a "new wife" again.<sup>51</sup>

### **Infibulation to hide pre-marital sex**

Some women have reported that they had chosen to be "stitched up" (infibulated) after engaging in pre-marital sex, to give the appearance of being a virgin.<sup>51</sup>

## **5.3. Barriers to prevention**

One qualitative study of 350 community members in Mogadishu and South Central Somalia reported that girls under 10 years of age cannot request exemption from FGM/C, as doing so is '*caasinimo*' (disobedience) to one's religion and parents, suggesting the existence of an injunctive norm that serves as a barrier to prevention in these regions.<sup>12</sup>

### **Survivor silence due to fear of reprisals**

As articulated by one Somali woman, "we (the females) do not like it, but we are silent due to fear of the community."<sup>47</sup>

## **5.4. Protective social norms**

A trend in favour of the typically less severe '*sunnah*' form of FGM/C is resulting in a reduction in the dominant 'pharaonic' form of type III form (infibulation).<sup>14,33,36,52</sup> It has been argued, however, that even a new social norm favouring the less extreme form of FGM/C is still a social norm supporting FGM/C.<sup>33</sup> The Somali Constitution (2012) prohibits FGM/C practices, however, neither local or federal authorities enforce the law and many Somalis are not aware that FGM/C is against the law.<sup>12,36</sup> As mentioned above, research suggests that in some diaspora populations Somali men have a preference towards uncircumcised women, which may serve to discourage this practice in these populations.<sup>48,59</sup> Some NGOs have been known to encourage men to choose uncircumcised women as partners to intentionally discourage this practice, however it could be argued that this approach further harms women who received FGM/C against their will.<sup>48</sup>

## 6. Limitations

There are several limitations of this literature review. First, whilst the decision not to impose a date restriction on literature for inclusion in the review was deemed necessary to elicit sufficient information given the sparsity of research on this topic, it is possible that some of the social norms in the older studies referenced may have evolved over time. Second, due to the limited scope of this literature review it was not possible to undertake a complete and systematic appraisal of each of the studies included in this review, thus it is possible that some of the findings included in this review have been derived from studies with limitations that call into question the validity of the findings. However, any findings that were considered to be insufficiently supported were not included in this review. Third, limiting the inclusion criteria solely to studies in the English language may have excluded valuable studies in other languages, most notably studies in Somali. And finally, it is possible that the search terms used did not fully capture the entirety of literature on this topic and so there may be relevant studies that were not included in this review as they were not identified by the literature search.



## 7. Summary

The literature suggests that VAWG in Somalia is a widespread and multi-faceted issue presenting in a range of forms. Some social norms serve to perpetuate VAWG and present barriers to support/justice, whilst others serve to protect women from violence and its consequences. Further research is needed to develop an understanding of the relationship between social norms and VAWG in Somalia and inform the design of interventions that aim to promote positive and long-lasting improvements to the lives of women and girls.

### 7.1. Recommendations

The literature review revealed several knowledge gaps and raised the following questions:

1. Which social norms contributing to VAWG in Somalia have the least resistance to change?
2. Which social norms would Somalis most like to see changed? Which are perceived as particularly problematic/harmful?
3. Why do some Somalis continue to seek infibulation despite the trend towards *sunnah* circumcision?
4. Which protective norms are particularly influential?
5. What other protective norms exist for each form of VAWG?
6. Are there any other social norms that contribute to IPV?
7. What determines which social norms prevail when there is a conflict e.g. between cultural and Islamic norms?
8. To what extent do social norms vary between populations/regions? What factors affect this variation?

**Table 1: List of references and type of social norms**

Social norm	References	Type of norm
<b>Sexual violence</b>		
<b><i>Social norms contributing to sexual violence</i></b>		
Rape accepted as 'normal'	12,14,16,18	Descriptive
Rape as exercising the 'right to rape'	12,17,18	Descriptive
Rape to facilitate marriage	12,14	Descriptive
Rape as humiliation/vengeance	19,24–26	Descriptive
<b><i>Social norms presenting a barrier to support/justice</i></b>		
Sexual violence should not be discussed as it is a culturally taboo topic	12,15,16,18	Injunctive
Sexual violence should not be reported to protect survivor/family dignity	18,30,31	Injunctive
Sexual violence not reported due to fear of shame/stigma	12	Descriptive
Sexual violence not reported due to fear of reprisals	12,14,16,18,23,29–31	Descriptive
Male relatives should report VAWG not survivors	23	Injunctive
Customary norms ( <i>xeer</i> ):		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marriage of survivor to perpetrator</li> </ul>	16,24,32	Injunctive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resolution without survivor involvement</li> </ul>	30	Descriptive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compensation goes to survivor's family or elders, not survivor</li> </ul>	12,16,23	Descriptive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compensation for inter-clan rape distributed amongst <i>dia</i>-paying group rather than to survivor/family</li> </ul>	32	Descriptive
Resolution of sexual violence most commonly occurs within the customary system (exc. IDP/minorities)	16,24,32	Descriptive

Resolution of sexual violence by IDPs/minorities most commonly occurs within the state system	16,24,32	Descriptive
<b>Protective social norms</b>		
Men should not commit sexual violence as it is abuse	12	Injunctive
<b>Intimate partner violence</b>		
<b>Social norms contributing to IPV</b>		
IPV acceptable as a form of discipline	12,18,31,36	Injunctive
<b>Barriers to support/justice</b>		
Survivor silence	15,24	Descriptive
IPV typically resolved within the customary legal system	12	Descriptive
IPV is tolerated until serious injury/death	16,33,40	Descriptive
<b>Protective norms</b>		
Perpetration of IPV is unacceptable	36	Injunctive
Men less likely to abuse wife if cohabiting with mother-in-law	15,41	Descriptive
Men should protect their sisters from IPV	24	Injunctive
<b>Child, Early, and Forced Marriage</b>		
<b>Social norms contributing to CEFM</b>		
Cultural acceptance of CEFM	15,29,42	Descriptive
Customary norms:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Godobtir</i> - exchange of women to facilitate a peace deal with another clan</li> </ul>	32,33	Descriptive

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rape as a means of reducing the bride price</li> </ul>	13	Descriptive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Dhabar-garac</i> - abduction and forced marriage of woman to abductor</li> </ul>	10,13	Descriptive
CEFM as protection from rape and its consequences	12	Descriptive
CEFM as a remedy for loss of virginity	12	Descriptive
Marriage of convenience e.g. financially beneficial	12,42	Descriptive
Adolescent-led marriage		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adolescent marriage to achieve elevated social status</li> </ul>	44	Descriptive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most adolescents marry before 18 in Somaliland/Puntland</li> </ul>	44	Descriptive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parental acceptance of adolescent-led marriage</li> </ul>	44	Descriptive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women/girls should not commit pre-marital sex as it is shameful</li> </ul>	44	Injunctive
<b>Barriers to prevention</b>		
Women/girls should not request exemption from CEFM as it is ' <i>caasanimo</i> ' (disobedience)	12	Injunctive
<b>Protective norm</b>		
Girls should not marry until they are > 18 years	44	Injunctive
<b>FGM/C</b>		
<b>Social norms contributing to FGM/C</b>		
Cultural expectation that girls/women receive FGM/C	47	Injunctive
Religious expectation/requirement that girls/women receive FGM/C	36,42	Injunctive
FGM/C to improve marriage prospects	36	Descriptive

Male preference for women who have received FGM/C	58	Descriptive
Uncircumcised women should be socially excluded	52	Injunctive
Wedding ritual of husband “opening his wife” should be observed	51	Injunctive
Women should be re-infibulated after childbirth	51	Injunctive
<b>Barriers to prevention</b>		
Girls should not request exemption from FGM/C as it is ‘ <i>caasanim</i> ’ (disobedience)	12	Injunctive
<b>Protective social norms</b>		
Current trend in Somali society towards less extreme form of FGM/C (sunnah)	14,33,36	Descriptive
Male preference for women who have <i>not</i> received FGM/C	48,59	Descriptive
Intentional pursuit of uncircumcised women by men to discourage practice	48	Injunctive
<b>Social norms relating to other forms of VAWG</b>		
Women/girls should stay indoors to stay out of trouble	12,15	Injunctive
Husband abandonment	19	Descriptive
Denial of VAWG in homosexual relationships	4	Descriptive

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